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ABSTRACT

An unnatural division has been created between two modes of discourse, discussion and debate, even though decisions in the tradition of a democratic society are seldom reached through "pure" debate or "pure" discussion methods. The types of discussion and debate taught and used in competition may not be the only appropriate forms of training students for the reality of democratic dialogue. For example, in forensic tournaments the "pure" form of debate is used almost exclusively and discussion is excluded, being reserved for use in the classroom. Becuase argumentation is an essential ingredient of discussion, a new forensic event should be created whereby the discourse, called "disbate," would utilize and unite both discussion and debate. (SW)

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"BETWEEN THE EXTREMES"

(A MODIFIED CONCEPT OF DISCUSSION AND DEBATE)

Presented by

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BETWEEN THE EXTREMES

It would be presumptious to believe the ideas discussed herein are new or revolutionary. In other forms these ideas concerning discussion and debate have been the essence of exchanges between professing members of the speech discipline for many years. The difference, I believe, is in the attempt to treat the raw substance of discussion and debate jointly rather than dichotomously. Almost without exception, the writers of traditional discussion and debate testbooks satisfy a seemingly compelling need to distinguish the differences between the two activities in the beginning chapter of their works. An impressive array of experts point out that "debate is this..." while "discussion is that..." and in so doing fortify age old assumptions which may not necessarily be accurate. Examples of this classification by division into two exclusive categories are readily visible in the distinctions of the "internal" and "external" methods of critical discussion-making.[1] the process of "inquiry" and the process of "advocacy,"[2] and the now not-so-popular "competition" versus "cooperation" controversy. Provided with given conditions the above opposing labels could be identified with either discussion or debate.

The purpose of this paper is to advance the notion that while we have legitimately attempted to develop and perfect the two modes of discourse (discussion and debate), we have simultaneously created an unnatural division between them which assumes they are incompatible as a unified activity. The point I am making is that the ideal types of discussion and debate which we teach and use in competition may not necessarily be the only or most appropriate forms of training to prepare students for the realisms of democratic dialog. More specifically, the

hammering out of decisions in the tradition of a democratic society is rarely, if ever, accomplished through "pure" debate or "pure" discussion methods. Rather, a combination of both methods intermittently used is more likely the approach taken by decision makers to arrive at and test the issues and solutions of a given problem. Our tendency to juxtapose discussion and debate has precluded they shall forever remain separate in the classroom and contest situations. The following paragraph is a representative example of the comparison and contrast frequently made by many authors in their reflections on discussion and debate.

> Discussion begins with a problem (rather than a proposition) and seeks a solution to this problem (which can be phrased as a proposition) through co-operative (rather than competitive) thinking; this thinking is reflective (rather than intentional) in character and proceeds through the steps usual in such thinking - problem, analysis, suggested solutions or hypotheses, reasoned development of these hypotheses, and the acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses (rather than an organized structure of evidence and argument offered as proof)....[3]

The result of this divisiveness has been that debate has been perceived as more acceptable for a tournament activity, while discussion has been perceived as less acceptable (or unacceptable) for a tournament event. Thus, the structuring of forensic tournaments has become so specialized that the focus on the "pure" form of debate is greatly intensified, while the concentration on discussion has been diminished to the point of extinction. Faules and Rieke report that "there has been a definite decline in the discussion event as a competitive activity."[4] They also report that the popularity of debate is indicated by the fact that over half of the schools listed in the American Forensic Association Intercollegiate Calendar held tournaments which include debate only.[5]

These data, compiled five years ago, were accompanied with an insightful prediction that has found substance in forensic programs today. The essence of their projection can be found in the following paragraph.

> The decline of group discussion and student congresses in forensic programs probably is not only a sign of intense concentration on debate but also of a general lack of enthusiasm for such an activity on the part of students and teachers. Nevertheless, to the extent forensic activities continue to devote themselves to events which deal exclusively with content variables to the exclusion of the social variables, forensics will be come more and more divorced from reality and it may in the long run become more and more difficult to account for its presence in a modern educational system in any capacity other than a sport or hobby for aggressive and verbally oriented students.[6]

Preliminary research by FRIG[7] indicates that program funding, administrative support and student attitudes reflect the reality of the above prediction.

Meanwhile the current trend in the academic classroom is toward a greater emphasis on small group interaction and group problem-solving through discussion. In essence the focus in the contemporary speech communication department runs counter to the focus in the modern forensic tournament. I do harbor a deep concern that much of the theory and practice in interpersonal and small group communication classes does not emphasize enough rational analysis and reasoned discourse, but that is the province of another discussion.

A few attempts have been made to adapt debate to a more realistic communication encounter, but for the most part they were either not popular or did not provide the necessary motivation for participation. Cross-examination debate has probably been the most successful (acceptable) adaptation and has provided a minimum increase of interaction between the

participants (and in some cases the critic-judge), but the variation remains highly competitive oriented and provides little opportunity for substantive compromise or idea acceptance by the contestants. Indeed, a cursory analysis of forensic tournaments reveals that tournament directors and forensic coaches have not been responsive to the need to adopt a tournament event which realistically reflects training in the goals of human communication as taught in the contemporary educational system. The reply of an active forensic director, when asked about current innovations in debate, exemplifies recent efforts made to alter present tournament practices. He mentioned a few modifications he was aware of then drew the following conclusion: "It is needless to state that any changes are conservative to say the least, and most of them are discontinued after the first time."

In opposition to the protectiveness of debate as a forensic activity, there has been a ready willingness to discard discussion. The demise of discussion as a forensic event may well have been because of misconceptions surrounding it in its "pure" form, rather than viewing it as a real communicative situation. A notion once held (and still is to a lesser degree) was that successful discussion must contain the elements of cooperation and compromise. Participants minimized disagreements because they were "expected" to be cooperative. Likewise, they compromised readily which resulted in shallow analysis, pseudo-agreement and unrealistic solutions. They were competing to be the most cooperative. It is still advanced that "the participants in a true discussion do not know the answer to the problem.... (thus) ....There is no basis for competition..."[8] It seems that in-depth research before a discussion,

coupled with the drawing up of an agenda, would tend to solidify a discussant's position on particular issues, and quite likely promote in the mind of the researcher a pre-disposition on particular solutions. While I would readily agree that members of a discussion are not competing for the acceptance of a predetermined solution they have reached, I would submit that they are in competition when they disagree on particular issues within the discussion. I also submit that the most desirable means of resolving the issue disagreements are through the application of argumentative principles. Until the various contested issues have been tested through argumentation, there should be no unnatural attempts to secure a compromise. At the point in the discussion, cooperation (substantive not structural) should be temporarily suspended.

The nature of argument assumes the existence of two or more points-of-view, and varying viewpoints suggests some degree of competitiveness. Thus, it is natural that some degree of competition should and does exist in discussion if issues are to be adequately tested through argumentative discourse. The most telling indicator concerning this misconception that "there is no basis for competition" in group discussion is the reality that to my knowledge not a single textbook has been written called "Argumentation and Discussion." I won't attempt to recount textbooks entitled Argumentation and Debate. But that argumentation is used in discussion is not a startling new discovery. Authors earlier quoted conclude that

> ...the basic principles of argumentation have a wide application in both discussion and debate....And the kinds of evidence and reasoning used in discussion and debate are ultimately reducible to the same types and subject to the same tests.[9]

And how does all this relate to "pure" forms of discussion and debate, tournament events, and the "real world?" Not only do I believe argumentation is an essential ingredient of discussion, but I also believe that "real world" decisions are not made by "pure" forms of discourse. Others also hold the same belief. Wayne Thompson states in his debate text:

> Both debate and discussion are useful tools, and argument about which is the more valuable is pointless. In many situations groups should use both.
>
> Sometimes a discussion group in effect may debate several possible solutions and hold its decision in abeyance until the completion of the series of informal debates....Thus, a group that sets out to discuss inevitably engages also in debate.[10]

Another text refers to a similar situation in a discussion of hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The author contends that

> ...the hearings demonstrate that argumentation is at the heart of decision-making. It is part of the critical process of constructing and weighing reasons for a decision. In the hearings, argumentation allows the advocates to establish probabilities and reasons for eventual decisions.[11]

Here, then, is a real example of a discussion format using argumentation and debate within its structure. Thus, a conclusion arrived at by Glen E. Mills is not without substance and warrants further consideration. Mills writes:

> ...That in many real-life situations one cannot draw a sharp distinction between discussion and debate. A situation which begins as a discussion can become a debate if an issue divides the group into irreconcilable sides. Conversely two

> sides which start to debate can sometimes be brought together through a reflective-thinking process. Even when the pattern and the spirit of the group communication are clearly definable as inquiry rather than advocacy, there are or should be some applications of argumentation within that framework, particularly in the testing of the proposed solutions.
>
> This leads to the point that in the utilization of oral communication for problem-solving, discussion must sometimes give way to debate...[12]

Some of the stated occasions for the shift from discussion to debate are when an honest disagreement cannot be resolved by the discussion method and when some persons either cannot or will not discuss.[13]

On the basis of the foregoing discussion, it is not unrealistic to assume there are times and situations when discussants do not want to cooperate and compromise, which should then promote a debate format. Conversely, it should not be unrealistic to assume there are times and situations when a debater would want to concede his position when overwhelmed by the opponents argument, or maybe he would like to attempt to work out a compromise through the deliberative process. But the present structure of discussion and debate in both the classroom and especially the forensic tournament is so standardized and rigid that they do not allow for this type of communicative shift. An event should be devised and introduced which would permit these normal, real-life communicative shifts to occur without penality to the participant or contestant. Under the present situation a lower grade or immediate loss is almost certain if one debates in a discussion or vice versa. It would seem more realistic to provide a situation where the evaluation rewards the student for his ability to be versatile and proficient in

both modes of discourse. Among other things it would provide the students with an opportunity to learn and experience both cooperation and competition rather than having only the present philosophical choice of "either/or" with no other alternatives.

In a discussion of the pros and cons of diversifying a forensic program, Richard Rieke warns against "devising a new contest which differs from others only in superficial ways and does not advance the educational goals of forensics."[14] He goes on to say that there is justification for program expansion when a "forensic program seeks to duplicate actual communication situations for student practice."[15] It would seem that an event combining discussion and debate would fall in the scope of this latter statement and be fully justifiable. I am quite aware that many coaches would contend that efforts to achieve this end have been attempted in the form of student congresses, and after much bitter controversy have not proven very satisfactory. In fact, the author mentioned above has stated that "the most prominent media through which forensic directors have sought to duplicate real decision-making situations are the student congress and group discussion...."[16] He further reports that in 1968 the student legislative assembly was not very stable and that the rising emphasis on debate was causing the student congress concept to be threatened with extinction.[17] Among the stated reasons for the demise of student congress was the near elimination of competition resulting in a loss of motivation, and the monumental task of judging the event.

With the forgoing discussion in mind I would like to propose a forensic event which would emphasize the importance of human interaction

in decision-making and at the same time circumvent the problems mentioned above. What follows is a suggestion which attempts to satisfy the creation of a "new" event. The proposal is descriptive and explanatory in nature, and it goes without saying that the particulars are subject to revision as each situation and circumstances dictate.

Assuming the adoption of this event, a list of problem-centered topics could be devised either by an individual tournament director or an AFA committee. The topic list could then be circulated to interested coaches and students aspiring to enter this event. The contestants would indicate their priority choice of three topics with one alternative selection and return the list to the event director. They could then begin to research and prepare materials on their topic choices. Contestants would be matched in topic interest sections, as indicated by their priority list. I would suggest an upper limit of twelve contestants per section, but strive for a mean of seven to nine participants. It is possible for the number of participants to be greater or lesser, depending on the circumstances. They would first approach the topic through the deliberative process, but have the freedom to shift to a debate format whenever necessary, e.g., irreconcilable differences or honest disagreement on issues. The alliances in the debate would vary greatly. For example, if there were seven contestants, it is possible there could be five against two- or any other number combination. It is even likely there could be a three or four-sided issue disagreement, but the participants would have the opportunity to gravitate to the sub-group which they were in agreement with. It is conceivable that on some issues, that some

participants would remain neutral. If our claim is correct - that debate is the best means for critically testing ideas and issues - then debate should be the critical tool to resolve the disagreement. Once the issue is resolved (either by sub-group concession or compromise, or a decision by the critic-judge) the group could once again assume the deliberative approach through a discussion format.

The time limit of each "section round" should cover three or four hours maximum with no imposed minimum. The internal time limits of the round would be determined by the group, e.g., allowing time for sub-groups to organize materials and prepare strategies for issue debates. The orientation of the group would be task, but this does not imply the necessity of reaching a decision; however, a decision would be the logical goal of the group.

At least one critic-judge should be assigned to each section. The criterion for his judgment of the contestants would be similar to present judging standards such as use of evidence and reasoning, ability to refute, etc. In addition, the rating and/or ranking of contestants would be based on knowledge and implementation of the deliberative and debating processes, ability to work compromises, cooperativeness in both debate and discussion, utilization of time, flexibility and ease of making communicative shifts, ability to discriminate which mode of discourse is best suited to the material being considered and the dynamics of the group, etc.

If desirable (and it seems to be for reasons of motivation) a final tabulation of ratings and/or rankings could result in the determination of winners.

In this event it would be necessary for the participants (also coaches, teachers and critic-judges)

> ...to think of several levels of cooperation and competition on a sort of continuum, ranging from perfect cooperation through independent action to extreme competition. The phenomenon we label 'discussion, inquiry, and cooperation' and the one we call 'debate, advocacy, and competition' will not always occupy the fixed places on that continuum. Each can be moved toward one end or the other in terms of the goals, attitudes, and procedures that are dominant at any given instant. How we label the discourse when it is finished should depend upon the central tendency in respect to the goals sought, the attitudes of the participants, and the procedures followed.[18]

The discourse which utilizes and unites both discussion and debate - which ranges between "perfect cooperation" and "extreme competition" - that mode of discourse which is neither "pure" discussion or "pure" debate, has here been simply but aptly called "disbate." The concept of disbate is an affirmative answer to the question, "should it be the goal of forensics to observe problem-solving and policy-making in the world and devise student activities along the same lines?" Its acceptance should not be perceived as a replacement for discussion or debate, but as an alternate course to reexamine the conflict of ideas and to resolve controversial issues. It seems to be one of the realistic methods used to determine the policy in our democratic society, why shouldn't it be part of the educational training of our students?

FOOTNOTES

[1]Douglas Ehninger and Wayne Brockriede, Decision by Debate (New York: Dood, Mead and Company, 1963), pp. 7-10.

[2]Glen E. Mills, Reason In Controversy (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1968), p. 31.

[3]James H. McBurney and Glen E. Mills, Argumentation and Debate: Techniques of a Free Society (New York: MacMillan Co., 1964), p. 80.

[4]Don F. Faules and Richard D. Rieke, Directing Fornesics: Debate and Contest Speaking (Scranton, Pennsylvania: International Textbook Co., 1968), p. 23.

[5]Ibid., pp. 22-24.

[6]Ibid., p. 50.

[7]The Montana Forensic Association in conjunction with the Montana Speech Communication Association has sanctioned Project FRIG (Forensic Research Interest Group) to conduct exploratory studies into various aspects of forensic activities.

[8]McBurney and Mills, op. cit., p. 82.

[9]Ibid., p. 83.

[10]Wayne N. Thompson, Modern Argumentation and Debate (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1971), pp. 7-8.

[11]Craig R. Smith and David M. Hunsaker, The Bases of Argument: Ideas In Conflict (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1972), p. 9.

[12]Mills, op. cit., p. 32.

[13]Faules and Rieke, op. cit., p. 45.

[14]Ibid., p. 44.

[15]Ibid., p. 46.

[16]Ibid., p. 48; Quoting Charles Goetzinger, "Death Comes to an Old Friend?" Speaker and Gavel, II, No. 4 (May 1965), p. 103.

[17]Mills, op. cit., p. 35.

[18]Faules and Rieke, op. cit., p. 46.